# Philosophical Reflections on Teachers' Ethical Dilemmas in a Global Pandemic

Sarah K. Gurr[1,4] · Tatiana Geron[2] · Daniella J. Forster[1] · Meira Levinson[3]

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic raised not only overwhelming practical challenges but also deep ethical dilemmas for educators. There have been few efforts to connect these challenges to either ethical dilemmas teachers faced in pre-pandemic times or to philosophical analyses of complex normative terrain of teachers' work. We facilitated eleven discussion groups with 101 educators from seven countries on the dilemmas they faced due to COVID-19. Analysis of these sessions reveals how the pandemic amplified, exacerbated and augmented pre-pandemic educational dilemmas in ways that recalibrated teachers' core values and beliefs, and highlights the importance of engaging teachers in ethical dialogue.

**Keywords** Teachers · Schools · Ethical Dilemmas · Remote Learning · COVID-19

## Introduction

Schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic raised overwhelming practical challenges and deep ethical dilemmas for educators. During the global switch to remote learning and pandemic-era teaching in early 2020, international education scholars sought out teachers' voices to capture their practical concerns (e.g. Kim et al. 2021; Phillips et al. 2021). Many of the same concerns resonated across continents, including the challenges of teaching online, sustaining connections with students and families, fostering student wellbeing, and upholding teaching quality. There are significant ethical dimensions to these issues which echo pre-pandemic dilemmas in teaching but also offer to broaden philosophical analyses of the complex normative terrain of teachers' work. Emerging philosophical conversations offer ethical and conceptual insights into the pandemic and emotions (d'Agnese 2023; Schweiger

✉ Daniella J. Forster
   daniella.forster@newcastle.edu.au

1   School of Education, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia

2   Department of Education, Colby College, Waterville, USA

3   Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, USA

4   School of Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

2023) and shifting educational purposes (Frank 2023). This paper links to these by considering teachers and the ethical dimensions of their work during the pandemic.

In this paper, we focus on the "ethical dilemmas" that teachers across international contexts faced during the early months of the pandemic. Ethical dilemmas in education are situations wherein teachers must choose between multiple courses of action, none of which are evidently the 'right' action to take and all of which involve trade-offs and potential harm to students or school communities (Levinson & Fay, 2016). Ethical dilemmas may occur when teachers encounter conflicts between their held values, or tensions between these values and the realities of their work. We sought to understand whether educators perceived the dilemmas they experienced during the pandemic as a *disjuncture from* those they wrestled with pre-pandemic or as *continuous with* prior ethical challenges. Though many education departments were quick to respond to the pandemic, many people in those early months anticipated the pandemic to be short-term. As the situation unfolded, educators encountered great uncertainty as the nature of their daily work was in flux. We were curious whether the conceptual tools that philosophers of education have developed over time to frame and address issues in educational ethics could be of use to educators during a time of crisis.

In late March 2020, UNESCO reported that approximately 63 million primary and secondary school teachers were affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020a). By mid-April, they reported school closures in almost every country, affecting over 90% of all students enrolled globally (UNESCO, 2020a), and by May, more than 600 million students were affected by nation-wide school closures in over 100 countries (The World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). While more than 90% of education authorities implemented some form of remote learning during the pandemic, approaches varied (UNESCO, 2020b). Some schools were able to emulate the physical classroom through teachers' and students' use of one-to-one devices connected through high-speed broadband; others were constrained by inconsistent or inequitable access to functional hardware and internet connectivity, and still other schools were forced to rely solely on one-way communication through radio or television programs or mailed-out worksheets.

As education settings responded to the practical challenges of the pandemic, global policy conversations and popular media accounts emphasised normative claims and concerns about classrooms (Forster, 2020; Levinson 2020). In *The Conversation*, Maguire and McNamara (2020) exhorted that "the most vulnerable children should [be] prioritised" and "greater equity in access to education at this time may call for special arrangements," while numerous media outlets highlighted gaps in technology access and distance learning support – including what *U.S. News & World Report* called the "real duties" the federal government and communications regulators had in ensuring quality education for vulnerable students (Camera, 2020). As the summer progressed, then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that keeping schools closed would be "morally indefensible" (Jenkins, 2020). These normative claims were made using ubiquitous language of "disjuncture" – of educators' and students' experiences being unlike any that had come before. We were headed towards a school year "unlike any ever known," as the *New York Times* reported (Tugend et al., 2020). "All told, this has been a potentially damaging disruption to the education of a generation," Selwyn (2020) wrote in *The Conversation*. Yet, at the same time, we noted that many of the normative challenges and questions that were being discussed in public media were similar to those raised in previous literature on ethical dilemmas in education.

To understand what ethical challenges were salient to educators during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they related to pre-pandemic ethical concerns, from May –July 2020, we facilitated eleven 90-minute discussion group discussions via Zoom with 101 educators from Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Spain, the United States of America (U.S.), and the United Kingdom (U.K.). Our primary aim was providing global educators a space to talk and think together about ethical issues that mattered to them as the pandemic upended schooling. We sought to support teachers in recognizing and discussing the ethical dimensions of their practice to help them articulate and address moral tensions in their work and reflect upon their professional role. We recorded these discussions with participants' consent and conducted a thematic analysis informed by prior literature in ethics and education. As participants were recruited opportunistically for these discussions (detailed below), these themes should not be considered generalizable. Yet, the consistency and saturation (Small 2013) of our participants' responses indicate common experiences and themes across contexts, grade levels, and school types.

The insights shared here are a snapshot of teachers' initial ethical experiences of the pandemic. Our analysis suggests that the pandemic and resulting switch to remote learning *amplified*, *exacerbated*, and *augmented* pre-pandemic dilemmas around the globe, rather than *adding* novel dilemmas. We also found that, perhaps paradoxically, the intensity of educators' experiences during the first phase of the pandemic offered them opportunities to reflect on, and sometimes rethink, the aims of education and their ethical role in the profession.

## Theoretical Framework

Pre-Covid research in the field of educational ethics provides a baseline understanding of the types of ethical dilemmas familiar to educators across contexts. Colnerud (1997) identifies categories of dilemmas that arise through tensions in the norms of interactions with students, parents and colleagues, including interpersonal, professional, institutional, social conformity, and self-protection norms. In an extension of Colnerud's work, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2016) identifies five categories of ethical dilemmas in teaching: caring climate versus formal climate; distributive justice versus school standards; confidentiality versus school rules; loyalty to colleagues versus school norms; and family agenda versus educational standards. More recent work illustrates a number of concrete, real-world ethical dilemmas in education, including dilemmas about which values to prioritize in student grade promotion and grading policy, individual care for students versus whole-class well-being, teacher speech and privacy, and creating inclusive classrooms in politically polarized environments (Levinson & Fay 2016, 2019). Other scholars have also named the ethical tensions that exist for teachers in developing relational boundaries, navigating epistemic uncertainties, and implementing assessment and reporting (Aultman et al. 2009; Pope et al. 2009). The rich scholarship on teachers' ethical dilemmas pre-pandemic can help us contextualize the normative concerns we heard from teachers in the early days of the pandemic.

The teaching profession requires complex decision-making in the face of ethical difficulties (Campbell 2003). The moral dimensions of their work often matter deeply to teachers (Santoro 2018a), and teachers may discuss their work in terms of its ideological, moral, and intellectual significance (Lortie 2002; Sanger and Osguthorpe 2011; Shapira-Lishchinsky

2011, 2016). As professionals, educators possess grounded knowledge about the ethical challenges that exist within educational settings. When deliberated on and voiced, this knowledge can be valuable in informing public discussion about ethical complexities and injustices in schools (Levinson 2015). However, teachers generally lack a specialized language to speak about ethics (Cigman 2000; Thornberg and Oğuz 2016), and research shows there are limited opportunities for educators to engage in ethical deliberation and reflection, both within teacher education programs, and in their practice (Maxwell et al. 2018; Orchard et al. 2016; Webster and Whelen 2019). Moreover, teachers' ethical knowledge can fade over time (Campbell 2003) as they risk becoming desensitized (Colnerud 1997) or demoralized (Santoro 2018a) through participating in educational institutions that operate to anaesthetize moral agency (Biesta 2017). Our project operated from the standpoint that teachers can and should be supported to articulate the diverse values and principles at the center of their practice, and that making space to talk about shared problems and develop humanizing communities of practice around the ethical dimensions of teaching is essential (Breault 2005; Hansen 2021; Orchard et al. 2016; Sanger and Osguthorpe 2011).

When the ethical role of teachers is discussed in public discourse, by contrast, educators' complex ethical decision-making processes and self-conceptions are often oversimplified and flattened. The "heroic teacher" is one popular oversimplification: the assumption that teachers' professional role requires self-sacrifice. In the heroic teacher trope, teachers enter the profession out of selflessness and endure its difficult conditions purely through the care they have for their students. During the first few months of the pandemic, teachers globally were celebrated as heroes who overcame the challenges of the pandemic by adapting quickly to changes in schools, or by taking on additional responsibilities to ensure that no needs were left unmet (UNICEF 2020). On the first International Education Day of the Pandemic, the UN "commemorate[d] the tireless efforts of teachers, school administrators, government officials and other dedicated individuals who have made possible that children and youth continued to learn even against the largest disruption of our education systems due to COVID-19 pandemic" (UNESCO, 2021). Jill Biden (2021) called teachers the "heroes we needed," thanking them for "carrying the weight of this burden together."

While it is important to recognize the courage and skill of teachers during this time, this trope should be viewed with skepticism. The heroic teacher narrative can falsely eliminate ethical quandaries and privatize or hide teachers' ethical uncertainties, as heroes are presumed to be able to solve every problem through unquestioning self-sacrifice. We were concerned that celebrating teachers as heroes in the early months of the pandemic may have mis-recognized the ethical work teachers were responsible for and caused teachers to bury their own questions, worries, and dilemmas. We sought to design a dialogic experience that would recognize teachers as the complex professional and ethical actors they are, and support them in puzzling together about ethical dilemmas they were experiencing.[1]

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[1] During this time, the view of teachers as self-sacrificing heroes gave way to more cynical perspectives on educators in many of the contexts we studied. We use the heroic teacher trope as a tool for understanding how teachers believed they were erroneously perceived. This paper argues that one-dimensional views on teachers' ethical roles obscure the more complex ethical nature of teaching, particularly during a pandemic.

## Methods

Twelve philosophers of education partnered with us to lead discussions with educators in their home countries. They spanned nationalities, primary languages, racial and ethnic identities, university roles, and scholarly interests. Our research team had a similarly diverse makeup. For each session except the ones in Spain and in Greece (due to our own linguistic limitations), a member of our research team partnered with the international scholar to co-facilitate the discussion. In total, we involved 101 participants in nine countries: Australia, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Greece, Mexico, Spain, the U.K., and the U.S.

Discussion participants were primarily recruited through our website and social media, personal and professional contacts, and snowball sampling. This opportunistic sampling strategy favored educators who had already studied philosophy and education and cannot be considered representative of all teachers' experiences. Nonetheless, it afforded us access to a global sample of educators across school contexts and roles: public district, charter, and private; rural, suburban, and urban; early childhood, primary, secondary, and higher education; and teachers, teacher education students, administrators, and educational support staff.

Each 4–12 person discussion group followed a discussion protocol developed for normative case study discussions and adapted with partnering scholars for their contexts (Levinson & Fay 2016). The discussion began with facilitators asking, "What challenges have you faced in your classroom, school, or district as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that you don't have a right answer for?" Co-facilitators prompted each participant to share at least one specific dilemma, and their answers served as a basis for discussion. The protocol questions were used as prompts that scholars could adapt to their contexts and best serve teachers. Facilitators served as interlocutors, summarizing areas of discussion and supporting teachers' philosophical insight. For example, in a discussion with Canadian and U.S. educators, one facilitator summarized, "I've heard several of you express some anxiety or concern that there isn't consistency in the ways that different teachers and different educators and people in schools are implementing COVID responses. And that can be a concern because *we often think of consistency as one of the linchpins of a fair system"* (emphasis added). Discussion moves such as these developed an iterative approach to raising topics and their ethical valances, with facilitators often providing language and concepts to illuminate teachers' ethical difficulties.

This discussion approach enabled us to be in service to teachers who were struggling with the ethical dilemmas of the pandemic. However, it introduced another layer into our analysis, as we had to distinguish among normative claims and interpretations offered spontaneously by our participants, those offered in the course of the discussion by one of the facilitators to which the participants then often responded and expanded upon, and those that we identified during our coding but that were not necessarily explicitly named by either participants or facilitators in the course of the live conversation. To analyze the de-identified discussion transcripts for their normative salience, we developed a two-prong coding strategy. First, two readers emically coded each transcript for the *topics* that participants raised in the conversation. See Table 1 for the complete code book including the 33 identified topics. Second, two readers read each transcript to identify language that could reasonably be interpreted as concerning *values* and/or *dilemmas* identified in the literature. Those sections of dialogue were etically coded from a code book of thirteen *normative* values and types of dilemmas based on current scholarship (see Table 1 for the complete list). These normative

**Table 1** Code book

| Type | Description | Codes |
|---|---|---|
| I. Normative | <u>Single code</u> when we are identifying normative concept or theme ourselves that is only implicit in the discussion; <u>double code</u> with **Explicit** when the participant(s) themselves use normative language or name the concept; can be for single speaker or large chunk for multiple speakers if they are all discussing the concept. | A. Care for self<br>B. Care for others<br>C. Fairness/Justice<br>D. Equity/Equality<br>E. Accountability<br>F. Personal morality/responsibility<br>G. Role morality [e.g. responsibilities specific to being a teacher]<br>H. Public morality [e.g. responsibilities of a citizen]<br>I. Privacy<br>J. Least advantaged<br>K. Privileged<br>L. Autonomy<br>M. Integrity<br>N. Educational value<br>O. Existing problem<br>P. Merit |
| II. Topics | <u>Single code</u> when it's about students or simply the thing/practice itself; <u>double code</u> with **Teachers**, **School**, or **District/Province/State** when it is about one of these groups. So, for example, if the participants are discussing rising student depression and anxiety, code as Mental Health; if they are discussing their own rising anxiety, double code as Mental Health and as Teachers. | A. Engagement/disengagement<br>B. Attendance<br>C. Grading<br>D. Standardized tests/exams<br>E. Other assessment or accountability<br>F. Curriculum<br>G. Lesson, unit, or course planning<br>H. Job security<br>I. Vulnerability [medical, social, economic, academic, etc.]<br>J. Privacy<br>K. Special education<br>L. Mental health<br>M. Race<br>N. Class<br>O. Diversity<br>P. Disparities<br>Q. Social-emotional development/well-being<br>R. Academics<br>S. Technology<br>  a. Use [e.g. videos on/off, what is permitted or restricted]<br>  b. Availability<br>  c. Affordances<br>T. Resources<br>U. Unexpected benefits [e.g. students who speak up more now than they did in class; opportunities to learn about students' families]<br>V. Identity [e.g. one's identity as a teacher; students' identities]<br>W. Relationships<br>X. Safety<br>Y. Educational aims<br>Z. Teaching [e.g. what it means to be a teacher; what feels essential to the act of teaching]<br>AA. Workload<br>BB. Families<br>CC. Authority<br>DD. Discipline/punishment/policing<br>EE. Classroom environment<br>FF. Gender<br>GG. Administration |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Type | Description | Codes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| III. Context | Use this when participant specifically references their context as a frame for what they're saying. | A. Urban<br>B. Suburban<br>C. Rural<br>D. Private school<br>E. Public school<br>F. Charter<br>G. Early childhood/preschool<br>H. Elementary/primary school<br>I. Middle school<br>J. High/secondary school<br>K. Higher education<br>L. Vocational education<br>M. High-poverty<br>N. Low-poverty<br>O. Substantially separate classroom or school<br>P. Nation [e.g. if someone is making a point that "In Greece, …" then code Nation and put Greece in a comment -- but only if it seems worth noting/paying attention to]<br>Q. Non-school setting [educational context outside of formal schooling, e.g. libraries, museums] |
| IV. Student characteristics | Use this when participant specifically references student characteristics or demographics as a frame for what they're saying. | A. Class<br>B. Language [including ELL]<br>C. National origin [including undocumented, refugee]<br>D. Special needs/exceptionality [including gifted]<br>E. Race/Ethnicity |
| V. School subject | Use this when participant specifically references their subject as a frame for what they're saying. | A. Math<br>B. English/Language [i.e. in Greece would be applied to Greek class]<br>C. History/Social studies<br>D. Science<br>E. Arts [art, drama, music, dance, etc.]<br>F. PE<br>G. Foreign language<br>H. Other |
| VI. Common dilemmas in different contexts | Use this if there is a surprising or interesting congruence that a participant or facilitator draws attention to–or that you notice and think people missed. | A. Common dilemmas in different contexts |

code terms were iteratively described and defined by the research team so that coders agreed how to distinguish between them. For example, if a participant mentioned the need to care about students' well-being, we considered applying the value code "care for others" to that section of dialogue. We discussed with the research team whether the participant's comment was consistent with scholarly conceptions of care as a value. This process allowed us to analyze how values and dilemmas brought up in our study connected to and departed from pre-pandemic literature on teachers' ethical dilemmas as well as check the validity of coding.

Moreover, for these normative codes, we specified whether the theme was *explicit*– the participants themselves used normative language or named the concept– or *implicit*– the coder interpreted the quote as having a normative valence even though the speaker did not say so explicitly. This distinction was crucial: as philosophers of education, our research team needed to be aware of whether we were ascribing normative meaning to teacher speech so that we did not overstep our interpretive roles. Additionally, because some of the facilitators had offered normative interpretations of participants' comments within the discussion sessions, we had to carefully distinguish between themes introduced by participants and themes introduced by facilitators. Thorough coding processes illuminated the saturation of specific themes across the very different contexts in which these discussions took place. We identified the most commonly discussed ethical dilemmas and normative themes from conversations with/between teachers in our discussion groups and common values that participants implicitly and explicitly raised as salient to their work during a global pandemic.

We focused on the top codes (with frequency of forty comments or greater) and read back through the data to further understand the particular dilemmas associated with these values. Next, we discussed these areas as a research team to identify dilemmas named by multiple participants across contexts. We identified five ethical dilemmas that were salient to educators globally in the early months of the pandemic.

## Common Ethical Dilemmas during the Pandemic

Dilemmas that resonated across discussion groups suggest that the pandemic and switch to remote teaching exacerbated or augmented pre-existing ethical dilemmas to the point where participants questioned established aims of education and professional roles. Educators across contexts described facing dilemmas related to:

1. The collapse of the boundary between public and private space;
2. Balancing obligations and shifting expectations of teachers' self-care and care for others;
3. Accountability for students and colleagues;
4. The exacerbation of existing inequities; and
5. The (re-)definition of educational aims.

We discuss each in turn.

## The Collapse of the Boundary between the Public and Private Space

Teachers throughout our discussion groups described the transition to remote teaching as an invasion of the classroom into their home life that led to an uncomfortable and problematic blurring of their public and private roles. "We were forced to convert our home to an office," one Greek teacher stated. "Suddenly, confinement [was] imposed and personally I felt that I was simultaneously spouse, mother, housewife and teacher in the same space." An Australian teacher shared, "I find it really, really difficult to have the camera on… because this is my home and I've got the children in my house. It's like [my students are] in my house." "Essentially, you're inviting everybody in the class into your home and thinking about what are the implications," a U.S. teacher echoed. The implications became clear in one discus-

sion group after another as teachers described having to prioritize either their work or home life as the "physical presence" of their relationships with students changed and the assumption that teachers divide their roles between the physical spaces of home and the classroom was called into question.

Some educators noted the benefits of remote teaching as they were able to learn more about students' worlds. A U.S. educator described getting to meet students' relatives and pets through a "show and tell" exercise and how these experiences enabled new dimensions to the teacher-student relationship. Spanish and German teachers described their increased awareness of students' lives and their families' needs, allowing them to offer support which, for them, extended the value of education beyond academics.

Yet, for other educators, this new digital window raised ethical concerns about privacy for both students and teachers. One Spanish teacher, concerned about the publicness of students' private lives during remote learning, reflected: "To what extent shall we keep things private, as we did before in tutoring sessions? … We've all been over-exposed." Across contexts, teachers grappled with questions about how to navigate the over-exposure imposed by remote learning as the private became increasingly public. While teachers have long grappled with dilemmas of privacy and whether to bring personal opinions and experiences into the classroom, the collapse of the spatial divide exacerbated these dilemmas and connected to new ways of thinking about teachers' roles and responsibilities.

## Balancing Obligations and Shifting Expectations of Teachers' care

**Care for Others**   During our discussions, many teachers spoke about their obligations of care and often framed these as central to their roles as teachers. Prior to the pandemic, teachers were expected to care for students' socioemotional well-being, often to support students' academic needs and report any general welfare concerns. COVID-19 shifted expectations of teachers' care, urgently requiring them to prioritize "this social part of our jobs that comes in naturally when you're in the classroom," and help students feel connected even as teachers lost the ability to see and check in with their students every day. This was clear to our participants whether they continued teaching in person, were forced into close proximity to students even as other parents pulled their children from school for safety reasons, or were expected to bring their work into their own homes through remote instruction.

Such tensions had implications for how teachers understood their professional obligations. Some teachers felt that the levels of care required of them increased as they tried to compensate for the loss of the physical classroom and the opportunities it offered to support students' socio-emotional needs. A German educator reflected,

> We have a lot more responsibility now just to … reach out to students to prevent depression or prevent our students feeling lonely. And I think our responsibility has shifted … for successful teaching this [personal] connection [must be] strong and now you have the sole responsibility to do that on your own….

For many educators, this increasing (though not always explicitly defined) volume of care required of them during the pandemic left them feeling "overwhelmed" or "disoriented." In some cases, teachers spent hours teaching their students remotely, and then provided stu-

dents further support across multiple additional platforms. One Australian teacher recounted "sending emails at midnight and getting up three hours before my lessons to try and make sure that the platform is working…" and confessed, "…we were all exhausted."

In addition to increased care responsibilities for students, educators across educational settings emphasized the heightened importance of family-school relationships in the pandemic. Many believed that the success of the transition to remote learning depended on schools supporting families throughout this change. In some cases, this involved regular check-ins with students and their families via phone or email; for others, this involved differentiating lessons to meet the strengths of students' carers and allocating time to teach carers how to use particular programs or tools so that they could support their children through remote learning. One Canadian teacher volunteered as "inhouse tech support to all teachers and families at [their] school" and received "non-stop phone calls." In this sense, the transition to remote teaching extended the assumed role of the teacher to include educating and caring for both students and their families.

At the same time, educators across contexts expressed concern about what was hidden in the transition to remote learning, particularly the student welfare issues left unreported when students were no longer able to attend school in person or had disengaged from the online classroom. One Australian principal explained,

> We have heard stories of what happened … upon [the children's] return [to school], but we would have made more and more instant calls to [Family and Community Services] … Because we weren't having that day-to-day contact, we didn't know about that. A lot of those things were hidden and quite serious issues.

For educators worldwide, the pandemic heightened the importance and expansiveness of teachers' duties of care while making it simultaneously harder for them to fulfill these caring roles.

**Self-Care** Many of the educators we spoke to also described dilemmas in balancing the increasing demands of their profession and their personal obligations of care to themselves and their families. For many, this tension was unsustainable, and their sense of responsibility to care for their students and colleagues sometimes directly interfered with their ability to meet the needs of themselves and their families. Teachers spoke of the personal costs of meeting the shifting expectations of them during the pandemic, sacrificing their time, personal health and well-being, and "neglecting" their own children's learning needs at the expense of caring for their students. This was clearly evidenced in a discussion with Australian educators. One teacher lamented that without her being able to provide parental supervision, "my own kids failed online learning spectacularly" while she taught her classes in the back room of their house. Another described her experience of teaching while she knew her daughter was in labor (where she could not visit her) and "trying to set up my online learning platform, hoping that [my daughter] is okay … and not coping very well."

Another teacher explained how she set boundaries as work moved online to care for herself amidst a challenging family situation:

> I [had] to remove myself from WhatsApp because WhatsApp is where my husband is in lockdown overseas … I haven't seen him for six months. WhatsApp is what I read when I go to bed, and it's the last message from my husband and my son who's also in lockdown in Turkey, and what I was getting was 45 emails about year nine's exam on Monday.

Many participants also explained that they did not feel cared for professionally. An Australian teacher noted the importance of keeping teachers mentally and physically "healthy enough to make the environment stable for everyone else," while a U.S. teacher worried that wearing down teachers would "inhibit their ability to actually support the students." Other U.S. educators who were anticipating the return to in-person teaching at the time of our study also wrestled with the question of who they should see outside of school, given their potential exposure to students during the school day (and vice versa). These dilemmas of personal versus professional care obligations and care for the self versus care for others were upheld as teachers had to balance what one Spanish educator described as the "risk of infection [to themselves and their close contacts] with [their students'] right of education."

## Accountability: Issues of Surveillance, Equity and Overreach

Educators have long faced ethical dilemmas related to parental and administrative oversight, and the pandemic heightened these concerns as well. For some teachers, the transition to remote teaching, and its heightened monitoring and accountability measures, made them feel that they had more responsibilities but fewer freedoms. As the classroom moved to the private sphere, teachers' lessons were often informally monitored and observed by parents and carers. An awareness of this informal monitoring made some teachers feel pressured to alter their regular classroom practices and behaviors. One U.K. teacher explained,

> "In every single minute the management can step into the classroom, which can happen in the school as well … [But] the parents are much more [present]. … So, I'm teaching and the parents might be in the room. … I would feel very comfortable going off track at school, [but] I might not feel so comfortable going off track when I teach from home … [because] you have other people present in the classroom that you won't have in the school."

A Greek teacher shared similar concerns, "We lost our spontaneity. The relationship between a teacher and the students, it's rather formal when you meet online."

Some schools required teachers to upload their materials and students' work samples for monitoring, while in other contexts surveillance practices were even more invasive. One German teacher noted that their principal felt so helpless about his limited control during remote teaching that he required teachers to monitor their own colleagues. In this school, teachers were required to "send [colleagues] emails about progress in class, about what they have done during the week… collect that information, and to go to our headmaster and tell

him about it." This teacher found the practice unsettling, explaining "it's not my position to monitor my colleagues."

Teachers were also concerned about the extended surveillance that schools were perhaps inadvertently normalizing for students. As one U.S. teacher educator explained,

> We're not thinking about this immense data trail that we're leaving behind …I get [concerned about] all the profiling that is happening about how our youngest children are learning and engaging and where they click and why…. We're in the middle of trying to solve a crisis right now, but the byproduct of all of our digital interactions… will be with us for a very long time.

Some teachers found that the heightened exposure to students' private lives and domestic hardships in remote learning made it difficult to reconcile their professional obligations to hold high expectations for their students' assessment and curriculum engagement, particularly in contexts where formal assessments and grading practices were canceled, with their professional obligations and moral compulsion as educators to care for their students. The transition to remote learning also led teachers to question what expectations, if any, they should set for students during a global pandemic and school closures. Some teachers grappled with the question of what constitutes a "legitimate" excuse for not engaging in the remote classroom, while others questioned whether they should hold different expectations for those students whose families maintained contact with the school compared to those who did not. A U.S. teacher asked,

> Should we hold students to different expectations based on what we do know about their home life? I have students [whose] parents text us every day and say, 'Oh, yeah, I asked them to get online and they just won't do it,' like, should they be held to a different expectation from a student whose family we just simply can't get in contact with?

Changes to assessment and reporting practices generated further assessment dilemmas for educators. In some contexts, teachers were asked to predict students' grades or practice grading leniency, raising ethical questions about the integrity of grading practices, while in other contexts where grades were not reported, some teachers found it challenging to maintain student engagement without grades as a motivator. Questions such as "What does grading look like at a time when school looks so fundamentally different?" (U.S.) and "On what basis do we make the selection [of grades]? Do we attend to the academic or personal circumstances?" (Spain) arose frequently in our discussions.

## Intensifying Existing Inequities

Teachers across contexts expressed concern regarding how the pandemic exacerbated or intensified existing economic and educational inequities. One U.S. teacher reflected that while the pandemic affected the whole school community, the effects were particularly difficult for vulnerable families.

> Some families are super well-resourced with not only multiple devices, but multiple adults, and sometimes need help. And then there are some families who … had only

> one parent or two very stressed working parents and everything that the school sort of mostly masked was suddenly not masked at all.

This "masking" referenced how the school setting previously acted as a partial social equalizer; in the move to remote teaching, economic inequities were made more apparent. Another U.S. teacher outlined a similar process occurring for learning disparities.

> The fact that you don't have … these moments back [in the school] both compensate for but also mask inequities in terms of, like, the manner in which I'm providing services to a particular student or the degree to which I'm pushing a particular student. It feels like when I'm in the school building, a lot of times both for better and for worse, social interactions can mask that. It's almost like now in this environment, it's revealed.

In particular, teachers across contexts highlighted disparities in access to technology as a spotlight on both economic and educational inequalities. One Canadian teacher described the dilemmas they faced in locating and maintaining contact with students without access to technology due to limited supplies of computers through the school board.

> There's all these tensions where you have the school board sending out information to families saying, 'please let us know if you need devices.' But if the family doesn't have a computer to begin with, never mind the digital literacy skills, they're not going to respond. And so… it's a catch 22.

When education shifted to the online domain, access to technology was critical; but when the demand for devices outweighed the availability that schools or districts were able to loan families, and when these access issues were exacerbated by existing economic inequities, low digital literacy of students and guardians, and family welfare concerns, equity become ever more difficult to pursue.

## (Re-)Defining Educational aims

The uncertainty of the pandemic prompted teachers to reflect on, and in some cases reevaluate, the aims of their work in education. In particular, participants across contexts spoke about how the need to care for students shifted what was considered most essential in education, as schools and educators prioritized the socio-emotional wellbeing of students over curricular obligations, re-defined curriculum to reflect the needs of students and the school community, or questioned their ability to provide necessary care under remote conditions.

For some teachers, relationships were instrumental to aims of student engagement and academics. One U.S. teacher described the "connection and community" between students and their teachers as being "as important, if not more important than the academic standards, because … we can't reach the academic standards without that connection [and] engagement." For others, socio-emotional aims superseded academic aims. Another U.S. teacher shared,

we're really focusing on … the social-emotional needs of the students. … We had a lot of kids where their biggest issue [in their end of year reflection surveys] was … 'I need my support system'. And so, we're cutting down a little bit on instruction time and adding in a big, like advisory curriculum for the fall…. [It's been] our number one priority, and I think curriculum probably comes second.

For other teachers, the teacher-student relationship and social and emotional connection with and between their students has long been the aim of their practice. While technology allowed teachers to stay connected with some of their students during the pandemic, many felt disconnected in remote teaching and as if part of what one German teacher described as the "culture of teaching" had been lost. Reflecting on the loss of the social aspect of teaching, one U.K. teacher admitted, "following the lockdown and online teaching, what's left of the profession is everything I don't like about it." An Australian teacher was so upset about her lack of interaction with students that she shared, "it's made me question whether I want to be teaching like this. I think this is going to be about [my] last year actually."

Some teachers were motivated to re-evaluate broader educational aims. One Australian teacher affirmed:

[We] need to re-evaluate … what was important in the past …What is it now that I want most from being in the classroom with the students? So, what's going to be at the top of our list of priorities? And then maybe re-evaluate then how I present that to the students … I'm hoping that maybe it might now start people having a look at the way that education has been delivered for the last 20-odd years in this country … can we not now use this as the opportunity to start creating some sort of change?

Similar thoughts were shared by an U.S. teacher who called on educators to ask:

Why are we educating? And how are we educating? What is the 21st–and we're already 20 years into it–but really, what is the … 21st century model of education that we want to have for our students? … we're so concerned … with the pandemic that it's hard to really give time for this, but we really need to use this time, what's happening now and how it impacts us and our families and our students, with how we want to educate in the future. And it might take several years to get to that point where we've made those changes based on what's happening here and now, but … we need to make them and we can't go back to before. We have to move forward.

For these teachers, the pandemic-era changes served as an opportunity for reflection and to define a more worthwhile vision for education.

## Discussion

Across international contexts in the early months of the pandemic, educators in our study identified ethical dilemmas concerning the collapse of boundaries between the public and private space, balancing shifting obligations and expectations of care for the self and others; navigating the requirements for accountability and compounding social inequities; and the

negotiation of different educational aims. These dilemmas are not intrinsically new to pandemic-era teaching. Instead, we argue that these were familiar dilemmas that were amplified, exacerbated or augmented by the conditions of the pandemic.

There is evidence in our study that the pandemic *amplified*, or made more apparent, pre-existing dilemmas in education. For example, teachers have long been required to navigate social inequities in their classrooms and dilemmas that arise from these. Yet, as teaching transitioned online, access to technology and resources became even more essential for access to education. The prerequisite of technology access and the resource scarcity of some schools, along with disparities amongst students and families in access and digital literacy, amplified pre-pandemic dilemmas of providing equitable access to education.

However, our analysis suggests that more dilemmas were *exacerbated*, or felt more deeply, due to the pandemic. For example, the transition to online technologies intensified concerns of data tracking and digital surveillance, exacerbating pre-existing dilemmas about the extent to which students should surrender their right to privacy in exchange for their education (Levinson & Fay 2019; Warnick 2013). Additionally, the collapse of the boundary between teachers' public and private lives exacerbated dilemmas of distinguishing where their role as teacher ends and their personal identity as private citizen begins. For some, this blurring of public and private spaces fueled expectations for teachers to be constantly 'on' and accessible to their students, contributing to experiences of burnout.

Furthermore, the culture of accountability present in many schools today was exacerbated as the classroom became more public. In recent decades, neoliberal education policies have resulted in increased accountability measures for staff and standardization of curriculum and assessment for students (Biesta 2017). However, with parents sometimes present during video lessons during remote learning, teachers' work became more 'public' and was subjected to greater scrutiny by the broader school community. At the same time, the 'privateness' of the spaces from which teachers were doing this work presented barriers to pre-pandemic administrative monitoring, and some school leaders developed new forms of accountability because they did not trust staff to meet expected work standards at home. As such, increased accountability of teachers became both a byproduct and reaction to the circumstances of remote teaching during the pandemic.

Finally, the pandemic exacerbated concerns about student evaluation. Many scholars have described the ethical dilemmas teachers experience when there is a conflict between institutional norms and students' realities as a 'clash' between the structures of the profession and teachers' understanding of their ethical responsibilities (Colnerud 1997; Santoro 2018a; Tirri 1999). In this, expectations around grading and assessment can create moral conflict for teachers as they are expected to adhere to institutional norms and principles in ways that may override or compromise their values, such as being forced to evaluate students against narrow, standardized assessment metrics which undermine care-based teaching practices (Colnerud 2015). The transition to remote learning provided greater insight into students' private worlds and amplified educators' sensitivities to the additional needs and barriers of students. In doing so, it exacerbated familiar assessment dilemmas for teachers as their moral responsibility to recognize students' needs made it harder to maintain institutional norms of assessment and accountability and raised questions about the fairness of these measures for all students during the pandemic (Colnerud 2015). These circumstances prompted teachers to reflect on and recalibrate their outlook of the nature and purpose of grading and accountability in light of their broader values and educational aims.

We also find reason to believe the pandemic *augmented*, or added new features to, well-established ethical dilemmas. For example, the blurring of public and private spaces also augmented pre-pandemic boundary and privacy dilemmas, wherein teachers feel pressured to sacrifice personal time to complete lesson planning and grading at night and on weekends to fulfill their professional role (Aultman, 2009). The intrusion of professional responsibilities into non-working hours was augmented as students could literally peer into the homes of teachers during remote learning and teachers found themselves texting students late at night to provide support. Through this, teachers were forced to navigate their multiple roles and responsibilities as teacher, parent and/or carer simultaneously and prompted to reflect on and reconceive the extent and expectations of their roles (Day et al. 2006; Day 2011).

Pandemic conditions also augmented care-based dilemmas for teachers as their care obligations were stretched to account for students' educational, physical and socio-emotional needs in new ways. Care has long been recognized as a core ethical principle in educators' relationships with students (Hargreaves 1998; Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim 2020; Noddings 2013). Teachers experience ethical conflicts and moral uncertainties when their obligations of care conflict with other values, including institutional rules and standards (Colnerud 1997; Shapira-Lishchinsky 2011; Victor and Cullen 1998). Such conflicts were the most prevalent for teachers in Shapira-Lischinsky's study, and several resolved the tension between these values by clarifying or defaulting to school rules or tempering their caring relationship with a student to be more in line with school norms. Similarly, educators in Colnerud's study were often "ready to abandon" the value of caring when it came up against their relationship with other adults (parents and colleagues) and in the face of school standards (p. 634). Thus, in the literature, pre-pandemic ethical dilemmas in teaching often saw care undervalued in relation to other ethical considerations.

In our study, this relationship was flipped. Care for students was given primacy in educators' accounts of their ethical dilemmas, to the extent that it overshadowed teachers' other personal and professional considerations and became a guiding value in interactions with families and students. Dilemmas of how best to meet these care obligations were compounded during online learning by resource inequities that made it difficult for teachers to maintain contact with students to meet their needs, as well as greater limits on teachers' time as they were juggling new practical challenges of teaching remotely. The loss of the physical classroom complicated these issues further and challenged how well teachers were able to maintain professional obligations of care without the physical classroom, as risks to students' wellbeing were out of reach or hidden through provisions of remote teaching. As teachers tried to balance these heightened care obligations with the new practical challenges and time constraints of preparing to teach remotely some of these needs could not be met. In this case and in others, pandemic dilemmas intertwined to create a new landscape of moral difficulty for teachers.

Many of these amplifications, exacerbations, and augmentations have remained, or remained in flux, in the years since the pandemic shuttered schools worldwide (Clark, 2022; New South Wales Teachers Federation, 2022; Sainato, 2021; Sophinos, 2021; Weale, 2020). At the time of our study, our participants recognized the essential roles they were playing in society and negotiated how to fulfill that role alongside their personal obligations. Many offered themselves wholly to the service of their students and community at considerable personal cost. Then, as now, the heroic teacher trope failed to capture the more complicated dynamics that teachers were negotiating amidst these shifts.

While the work of teachers during the pandemic should be recognized, it is important to view this heroism in the context of social injustices and policy failures that generated circumstances where, for example, teachers and schools were buying and delivering food to their students to ensure they were fed while schools were closed during lockdown (Craig, 2020), or, as the pandemic progressed, were expected to keep their schools and classrooms open at significant risk to their own health and that of immune-compromised students and school community members (Blad 2022; Giuffrida and Tondo 2020; Magnet, 2020). Since we conducted our study, pandemic-exacerbated teacher shortages have occurred worldwide, causing, for example, older teachers to be called out of retirement and pre-service teachers to be thrown into classrooms under-prepared to meet staff shortages exacerbated by the pandemic (Brown & Weekes, 2022). Our findings lead us to wonder whether these challenges link to the pandemic-era exacerbation and augmentation of pre-existing ethical dilemmas that frame and define what it means to be a teacher.

## Conclusion

Across international contexts in the early months of the pandemic, educators in our study identified ethical dilemmas concerning the collapse of the boundary between public and private space, conflicting obligations and expectations of teachers' self-care and care for others; accountability, intensifying inequities; and the (re-)definition of educational aims. The pandemic and subsequent changes in schooling resulted in an onslaught of dilemmas to consider and process. The pandemic collapsed the separation of personal and professional spaces and the distinction between teachers' professional roles and their personal identities. While caring for students has always been central to the work of teachers, the pandemic pushed this to the forefront of teachers' responsibilities, often forcing them to make difficult choices between the needs of their students, families and themselves. For many educators, this sharp increase in responsibilities was accompanied by a corresponding increase in monitoring and accountability measures from both parents and colleagues. Becoming more aware of students' lives outside of school also caused teachers to grapple anew with how to account for these circumstances in evaluating and holding students accountable to high standards. The repetition of these dilemmas from teachers across global contexts in our study suggested ways in which the pandemic amplified, exacerbated, and augmented existing ethical dilemmas in the field. Will the effects of the pandemic on the ethical landscape of teaching continue to build, or has it receded? With dire teacher shortages affecting societies across the globe the burdens and challenges of the role have been keenly felt, and perhaps served to further slow prospective teachers from choosing this career, and contributed to attrition as well. It leaves us asking what potential philosophical reflection for teachers can offer in these post-pandemic times.

For many teachers in our study, the pandemic may have prompted them to reflect and revisit the essential questions of education, serving as an opportunity to rethink the aims of education to better respond to the needs of students and society. Rather than their ethical knowledge fading or becoming desensitized to the moral dilemmas as they occurred (Biesta 2010), teachers in our study described the lengths they took to try to reconcile their previous understandings of ethical work in teaching with the new ethical demands of teaching during a pandemic. While our findings do not show evidence of demoralization so early in

the pandemic (Santoro 2018a), it seems plausible that rather than an inability to reconcile the demands of the profession with their moral center, teachers may be fully re-evaluating their moral center altogether.

In this context, discussion group conversations with small groups of educators may have helped bring clarity to their thinking. Additionally, it may have prompted a deeper recognition of educators' roles and values, and a questioning of the future of the profession. In the words of one U.S. teacher after her session, "I feel like I just went to therapy." Thus, there may be therapeutic as well as analytical benefits for teachers in engaging in deep, ethical and reflective dialogue about the dilemmas they experience. While the pandemic prompted a clear recognition of the inequities at the heart of education systems, the conversations themselves may have pushed educators towards a normative re-evaluation of the aims of education and how they themselves may facilitate these aims. The discussions offered space to articulate ideas about their care obligations, delineate private from public boundaries, and interrogate educational equity. The co-facilitators drew out salient concepts and offered metalanguage to model philosophical tools and expert skills within the established process of the discussion protocols. The clarity that philosophical tools can provide may offer relief for those searching for ways to interpret and articulate responsibilities, values and pressures of the role and surface underlying assumptions that can be examined more closely. This reflection and recalibration may be more significant in teacher education now, than ever, post-pandemic, and thus we urge that teacher education and professional development programs offer more frequent and sustained opportunities for active and guided philosophical work, elevating the explicit engagement of teachers with educational aims and purposes which contribute to their sense of good work (Santoro 2018b). This is especially important given the turn away from philosophical reflection in teacher education in recent years and the dominance of politically expedient technicist paradigms in educational research and practice which fail to address the challenges of teachers' work and their working conditions (Pendergast, 2023; Gore, 2023; Hayes, 2023; Ellis, 2023).

The heightened stakes of these dilemmas and the increased urgency with which educators sought to respond to them also suggest novel insights into the ethical questions these dilemmas pose. In other words, the experiences of these educators provide fresh avenues of inquiry that may challenge and unsettle how we think about these perennial dilemmas, and how teacher educators shape professional learning opportunities designed to address them. Normative explorations with educators in the field, such as those discussed in this paper, are potentially both philosophically generative and pedagogically powerful, enabling philosophers to serve the profession at a time of need while also making long-term progress on important questions in educational ethics.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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